United Nations

Daily Highlights

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TUESDAY HIGHLIGHTS

- Afghan Government releases nine prisoners of war, while Secretary-General's Personal Representative, Benon Sevan, is visiting Kabul for talks with Afghan President, high-level Government officials and representatives of independent groups.

- Security Council refers application of Azerbaijan for United Nations membership to Committee on Admission of New Members.

- Committee hears calls for adapting United Nations Charter and Security Council to new political realities.

- Fourteen years after first being proposed by Yugoslavia, draft declaration on rights of minorities is recommended to Commission on Human Rights for approval.

- Special Commission team completes seventh inspection of Iraq's chemical weapons capabilities.

- International Atomic Energy Agency Director-General, on visit to Syria, receives assurances about safeguards agreement.

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Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's Personal representative for Afghanistan, Benon Sevan, arrived today in Teheran after a two-day visit to Kabul, during which he met with Afghan President Najibullah, Prime Minister Fazlilhaq Khaliqyar, and Foreign Minister Abdul Wakil, as well as with representatives of a number independent groups.

Just before leaving Kabul, Mr. Sevan received, on behalf of the Secretary-General, nine prisoners of war released by the Afghan Government, in response to an appeal by the Secretary-General. The prisoners were handed over to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Mr. Sevan called the release a "necessary step on humanitarian grounds" and a "confidence-building measure designed to bolster the progress towards a peaceful settlement".

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Appealing for the humane treatment of all prisoners in accordance with international law, Mr. Sevan expressed his appreciation to the Government of Afghanistan for the release and said he hoped that it would be followed by many more releases, by all parties concerned.

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The Security Council this morning referred the application of the Republic of Azerbaijan for membership in the United Nations to the Committee on Admission on New Members.

With its decision today, the Council has taken action on the last of the eight countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States seeking United Nations membership. These are Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Turkmenistan. The General Assembly's admission of the seven new members will bring to 173 the total number of United Nations member States.

The other three Commonwealth members that are already members of the United Nations are Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Of the 15 former Soviet republics only Georgia, which is not a Commonwealth member, has yet to make formal application for United Nations membership. The three Baltic States -- Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia -- were admitted as members last year.

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Calls for bringing the United Nations Charter and the Organization's principal organs -- including the Security Council -- into line with new political realities were heard this morning as the Special Committee on the Charter and on the Strengthening of the Role of the Organization began its general debate.

Speakers observed that the Charter and these bodies had been designed according to political conditions prevailing 46 years ago. Suggestions for updating the Organization's structures included a new definition of "threats to international peace and security" which would encompass internal conditions relating to human rights and the rights of minorities; the admission of new permanent and non-permanent members of the Security Council, and a broadening of Council responsibilities in preventive diplomacy, peace-making and peace-keeping.

Delegates also suggested, among other reforms, the elimination of discriminatory references in the Charter to "enemy States", the introduction of a voting system weighted to reflect Member States' financial contributions to the Organization, and the establishment of formal links between the Security Council and regional organizations.

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Fourteen years after first being proposed by Yugoslavia, a draft declaration on the rights of minorities has been presented to the Commission on Human Rights, which recommended that it be adopted.

Introducing the draft, Zagorka Ilic (Yugoslavia), the Chairman and Rapporteur of the Commission's Working Group on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National, Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, said the drafting process had been delayed first by a futile wait for a definition of the term "minority", by the sensitivity of the subject matter and by the unfavourable international conditions that had prevailed.

Peter H. Kooijmans (Netherlands) remarked that it was tragic that at the moment when the time-consuming operation had finally borne fruit, the country which had set it in motion was itself torn by violent conflicts between various ethnic groups

Though the speakers all welcomed the report, their statements reflected the ongoing controversy it strives to accommodate. Some delegates underlined the importance of protecting individual rights and warned that the notion of "group rights" was "a recipe for resentment" by majorities, while others argued that it was perilous to ignore the potential explosiveness of disregarding national identity.

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The United Nations Special Commission inspection team which carried out the seventh in a continuing series of inspections of Iraq's chemical weapons capabilities reported on its return to New York yesterday that it had found no evidence of undeclared chemical weapons activities relevant to Security Council cease-fire resolution 687 (1991).

In the course of its work, the team observed the first in a series of test runs of an hydrolysis process designed to destroy nerve agents, but it said further test runs would be needed to confirm that the hydrolysis plant built at the Muthanna State Establishment met the Special Commission's requirements for nerve agent destruction.

The team of 19 experts from 10 nations, led by Commander Dieter Jopp of Germany, inspected 10 sites throughout Iraq and looked for evidence of undeclared chemical weapons activity. They also verified that all the equipment at a sugar factory that a previous inspection team had identified as being connected with the manufacture of aerial bombs had been returned to the Muthanna State Establishment, from where it had originated.

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Syria has informed the Director-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Hans Blix, of its decision to conclude a safeguards agreement with the Agency, in accordance with its obligations under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The notification came during a recent official visit to that country by Mr. Blix, who had discussed Syria's use of nuclear energy with Government officials.

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Mr. Blix called the conclusion of a safeguards agreement by Syria under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) "a positive step towards a general acceptance of comprehensive safeguards in the Middle East".

The Syrian officials assured the IAEA Director-General of their Government's commitment to the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and expressed the desire to have the Middle East region free from nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.

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